



University of Richmond
UR Scholarship Repository

Rhetoric and Communication Studies Faculty
Publications

Rhetoric and Communication Studies

2013

Spirits of the Cold War: Contesting Worldviews in the Classical Age of American Security Strategy. By Ned O'Gorman

Timothy Barney

University of Richmond, tbarney@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/rhetoric-faculty-publications>



Part of the [International Relations Commons](#), [Policy History, Theory, and Methods Commons](#), [Political History Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Barney, Timothy. "Spirits of the Cold War: Contesting Worldviews in the Classical Age of American Security Strategy. By Ned O'Gorman." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 16, no. 1 (2013): 202-06.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Rhetoric and Communication Studies at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Rhetoric and Communication Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

Spirits of the Cold War: Contesting Worldviews in the Classical Age of American Security Strategy. By Ned O’Gorman. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press; 2012. pp. xi + 321. \$59.95 cloth.

In February 1952, Congressman O. K. Armstrong of Missouri was invited to give a keynote speech at a convention called the *Conference on Psychological Strategy in the Cold War*, where he declared a maxim that, by that time, likely did not raise many eyebrows: “Our primary weapons will not be guns, but ideas . . . and truth itself.” Rep. Armstrong spoke from experience—a few months before, he had made national headlines at a peace treaty signing in San Francisco by blindsiding Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko with a map locating every secret Gulag prison camp. Calling the Soviet Union a slave state through international media was certainly one provocative way to wage a war of informational weaponry. For Armstrong, the Cold War was not simply about instrumental goals, it also was essentially *performative*, steeped in aesthetics and judged in the arena of public opinion, not just State Department conference rooms. That performance, though, also was self-directed, as such practices oriented strategists and their audiences toward accepting a particular postwar American identity. The Cold War, in short, involved specific ways of *being* and acting in the world, an important claim that forms the basis of Ned O’Gorman’s excellent *Spirits of the Cold War*.

O’Gorman’s “spirits” in the title are not some kind of metaphysical entity—they are worldviews, born of discourse, and part of America’s “social imaginary.” Such worldviews “are not just *outlooks*, they entail . . . self-images, or identities” (236). By toggling between these outward and inward perspectives, O’Gorman makes a significant contribution to critical scholarship on Cold War security ideologies, building on Frank Ninkov-

ich's notion of "image-based internationalism," which emphasized the role of symbols and the projection of American power in foreign affairs, and John Lewis Gaddis's arguments about the elevation of "means over ends" in Cold War strategy. At one point, O'Gorman uncovers an Eisenhower-era Department of Defense report that declares these developments plainly: "What deters is not the capabilities and intentions we have, but the capabilities and intentions the enemy thinks we have. The central objective of a deterrent weapons system is, thus, psychological. The mission is persuasion" (169). However, one of O'Gorman's key contributions is his assertion that these worldviews were not just tactics for manipulation—Cold War strategies corresponded to deeply held and shared beliefs about the world. Recall that Rep. Armstrong did not just believe he had "ideas as weapons," he also believed he had "truth" on his side. In O'Gorman's words, "strategy entails reckoning with a nation's 'best interests.' It seeks to organize a nation for successful being in the world, however, and by whomever, that is envisioned" (22). Strategy, then, is much more pervasive (and potentially explosive) because it aligns so closely with value and ideology.

O'Gorman's four strategic worldviews (stoicism, evangelicalism, adventurism, and romanticism) efficiently form the basis for the book's arrangement. The classic strategic doctrines of containment, liberation, massive retaliation, and deterrence are still rendered significant, but they are decentered from their usual places of prominence, and that is refreshing for readers burned out on rehashing the same old tried-and-true terms—especially those easy binaries of realism and idealism that are often the "bread-and-butter" of foreign policy studies. O'Gorman articulates his worldviews through particular public personalities: usual suspects like President Eisenhower, George Kennan, and John Foster Dulles get new recastings, while C. D. Jackson, a Time/Life executive, psychological strategist, and wordsmith for Eisenhower, gets elevated to this rarefied company. And while scholars like Ninkovich would trace the security doctrines of the Cold War back to Wilsonianism, the intellectual lineages of O'Gorman's four personalities go deeper. *Spirits of the Cold War* features the Bergsons, the Clausewitzes, the Webers, the Freuds, and even the Lipsiuses. O'Gorman's ability to meld these intellectual histories into his rich archival research to form the four case studies is nothing short of impressive.

The first two chapters distinguish the worldviews of those two most polar of Cold War opposites, Kennan and Dulles, and O'Gorman shows the

almost amusingly stark differences by unearthing some crucial correspondence between the two to link the chapters together. Of course, O’Gorman is not the first to discuss Kennan’s metaphor of American society as a “self” or his Freudian concern with mass subjectivity, but his tracing of Kennan to a neostoicism that is rooted in a kind of hyper-rational self-critique is novel and compelling. Such a worldview is, wisely, not reduced here to a realist and state-centric “balance of powers” perspective; in fact, O’Gorman’s most interesting points are that Kennan’s stoicism was the “least ‘American’ and most abstractly universal” (70) of the types, and that this father of bipolar containment could best “tolerate a world of difference” more than his contemporaries. By contrast, while Kennan was content with setting an example of American exceptionalism from afar and focusing on self, the restless evangelicalism of Dulles wanted to universalize that example, to fashion the whole world as a “moral community.” O’Gorman is on strongest ground when linking Dulles to actual *forms* of discourse, like the Protestant manifesto, rather than simply to philosophical content. By turning “massive retaliation” into a worldview, it becomes less “a strategic principle than a means of registering radical dissent and summoning moral outrage” (84). O’Gorman reminds us that if we see Dulles’s discourse merely strategically, we might see him as a kind of madman; yet, as an articulation of outrage at a sinful world, his calls to “destroy the world in order to save it” are made almost logical, or at least pragmatic, and are therefore that much more frightening.

Chapter 3 tackles the discourses of liberation by offering C. D. Jackson as a Machiavellian political adventurer, situating him as a key link between the Luce-ian lineage of the “American Century” in early World War II and the political-economic swashbuckling of the Kennedy administration and beyond. O’Gorman has been taken to task elsewhere (see *The New Republic*, December 12, 2011) for putting Jackson on the same level as Eisenhower, Dulles, and Kennan, but that criticism slights O’Gorman’s specific contributions as a rhetorical scholar. As O’Gorman understands, C. D. Jackson is arguably one of the most important Cold War architects because of his ability to articulate this strange war *as a text*—one that was consciously being written and fashioned. And it is exactly the fact that a public opinion raconteur like Jackson was as influential as Kennan that makes the Cold War such an endlessly fascinating web of discourses. While chapter 3 might be the best of O’Gorman’s essays, chapter 4 is perhaps the book’s most

important. For here, O’Gorman boldly claims that the dualistic romanticism of President Eisenhower was the typology that came to most embody America’s Cold War as it unfolded in spectacular fashion. Unable to reconcile “spirit” with “matter,” O’Gorman argues, “Eisenhower staked the future of the Cold War, and indeed of human society itself, on the ability of national and international audiences to discern and internalize a militant threat without at the same time confusing that threat with American ideals” (172).

As with any framework with discrete typological categories, O’Gorman often attributes too much coherence to his worldviews. Part of the appeal of his four Cold War figures is that they were engagingly messy articulators of American power, and such type-setting can sometimes smooth their rough edges and ignore the very contingencies of the international landscape and the fissures that invite rhetorical utterance. An additional problem is that a focus on worldview can lead toward armchair psychologizing about “gray matter” and away from the discursive evidence—as seen in statements like: “Jackson saw the world aesthetically and, in an important sense, hierarchically. . . . Global public opinion was for him like the king’s body—it was the set of power before which psychic proximity was crucial for political success” (154). O’Gorman is admirably aware of these potential shortcomings, but he often assumes a defensive posture in certain parts of the book. For instance, O’Gorman admits his own typologies are “severely schematic” (17), but then defends himself in the conclusion by noting “this approach to worldviews is not a form of willy-nilly social constructivism, but rather the product of the fact that language is the bedrock of the human sciences, especially the political sciences” (234), which may leave readers wondering if O’Gorman is trying too hard to please those who may think his work is merely “literary criticism,” as he puts it. This defensiveness can lead to points that are perhaps *overly* nuanced, in the John Kerry sense of the word. For example, O’Gorman’s attempt to differentiate his work from Ira Chernes’s theories of “apocalypse management” comes off like splitting hairs, while the discussions of synecdoche in romanticism versus metonymy in evangelicalism leave the reader a bit lost in the trees, looking for the forest.

These small faults, though, are largely born of O’Gorman’s strengths—ambition and depth. The book’s theoretical contributions and methodological approach should merit close reading in graduate seminars in public address and rhetorical theory, but the boldness of its ideas and the intricacy

cies of its historical research should invite a much wider and interdisciplinary group of readers in Cold War history and international relations. O’Gorman opens up exciting new possibilities for extension and critique—for example, what would his typologies make of the so-called Second Cold War that emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s? How would he characterize the “worldviews” of Brzezinski, Kirkpatrick, Reagan, and Weinberger? At one point, O’Gorman vividly describes his approach as the examination of “thick historical American languages congealed in worldviews” (6)—and the metaphor leaves us wondering whether those worldviews added richness to America’s diet or clogged its arteries. In other words, O’Gorman insightfully questions whether these perspectives of the world opened new avenues of action or closed alternative routes of approaching problems of international security. As with any good critical study, we find it’s a little bit of column A and a little bit of column B.

TIMOTHY BARNEY, *University of Richmond*
